A policy in search of a defence

REPATRIATION AHEAD French police evict Roma families from a camp near Lille. REUTERS

Every argument that France makes for its expulsion of Roma misses the mark, writes Peter Vermeersch

The new *politique sécuritaire* introduced by the French government, which is essentially a crackdown on unemployed or non-legally employed Roma immigrants from Bulgaria and Romania, has been sharply criticised because of its dubious legal and moral grounds. The forced, or semi-forced, collective expulsion of EU citizens on the basis of their ethnic identification clearly contravenes EU laws and may even be a form of ethnic discrimination.

France's response has been defensive. President Nicolas Sarkozy has tried to reason his way out of the legal and moral accusations by moving the debate to what he sees as the policy's positive outcomes. The purpose of the campaign, so he claims, is to increase security by reducing crime rates, to discourage illegal migration and, even, to push countries such as Romania and Bulgaria to step up their efforts to integrate their own Roma populations. But on all these points his policy completely misses the mark.

Consider crime. Selecting the Roma for a highly publicised expulsion campaign is not a particularly effective way of preventing crime. Rather, it criminalises them: they are collectively being held responsible for one-off events not related to their collective position as immigrants.

Sarkozy's policy plans were sparked, back in July, by riots that followed a shooting by police of a member of a family of French Travellers. But there is no link between the situation of these *gens du voyage*, who maintain an itinerant lifestyle, and the (non-itinerant) eastern European Roma, who are fleeing poverty at home and seeking opportunities abroad. The policy has constructed links between disparate groups and events, making every Roma and every Traveller now guilty by association. That does not increase feelings of security; it increases insecurity.

Does the campaign, then, perhaps discourage illegal immigration? Again no. The eastern European Roma will come back to France to seek jobs – just as other citizens from the new member states have travelled back and forth across the EU for the same reason. This is what the EU is all about: offering its citizens possibilities for socio-economic mobility beyond the borders of the nation-state. And Roma need exactly that: more opportunities for socio-economic mobility. There is no mystery as to what would stop illegal Roma migration: growing access to the labour market. Expulsion has the opposite effect. Some of the Roma expelled from France had modestly begun integrating into the labour market, albeit in irregular and temporary positions. The current policy does not provide incentives for those Roma to try to turn their irregular work into stable and official businesses.

Previous mass expulsions of Roma (sadly, this has a long tradition) have shown that such policies only encourage Roma to revert to a trusted method: survival on the margins. And for the *gens du voyage*, the expulsion campaign does not, and cannot, have any effect. As citizens of France they cannot be sent away. The only way in which the French government can diminish the number of illicit encampments is to increase the number of authorised sites.

Finally, will the expulsion policy impel eastern European countries to take the plight of their Roma populations more seriously? French officials have now met their Romanian and Bulgarian counterparts, but this late move seems nothing more than a weak response to growing international indignation.

Why this policy, then? Is Sarkozy trying to shore up his support on the right at a critical time for his presidency? And are the Roma just convenient, low-cost victims? As a political tactic, the policy might not be that successful either: it has not so much bolstered his approval ratings as created controversy and prompted adversaries such as the former prime minister Dominique de Villepin to claim that there is now a stain on the proud flag of republican France.

At the end of the day, this policy seems mostly inspired by Marx. I mean Groucho Marx. He once said: politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies.

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Don't pretend the EU is the Red Cross

The EU must improve its political response to crises and not just its ability to deliver aid, writes Richard Gowan

Is the European Union good at saving lives? This year, Haiti's earthquake, Pakistan's floods and Russia's fires have stirred up debate about how the EU delivers crisis aid, with Nicolas Sarkozy, France's president, calling for the creation of a European emergency response force.

In Brussels, officials complain that although they play a leading role in funding international humanitarian operations, they don't get enough credit for it. Kristalina Georgieva, the European commissioner for humanitarian aid, argued in an August interview that EU-funded aid agencies should "do more to help the EU by flying the EU flag".

Georgieva is now preparing proposals on how to improve European responses to crises. She may use the lessons of the last year's catastrophes to propose significant reforms. It would, for example, make sense to create a single EU assessment team deployable to disaster zones, reporting to all member states; after the Haiti earthquake, EU governments sent separate assessment teams to Port-au-Prince.

But Georgieva should resist the temptation to Europeanise crisis response for its own sake. Efforts to strengthen EU capacities should not come at the expense of efforts to reform and develop the wider international humanitarian system.

That system – including UN agencies, non-governmental organisations and the Red Cross – has grown massively over the past decade: today, there are 250,000 humanitarian workers worldwide, compared to fewer than 150,000 in the late 1990s. Aid delivery is also more efficient, with the UN overhauling its systems at the behest of European donors such as the UK and Sweden.

Even if emergency workers are not "flying the EU flag", the scale and improvement in humanitarian assistance today is a tribute to European policies. As aid expert Abby Stoddard argues, these European initiatives have often contrasted with an "absence of high-level engagement" by the US in reforming the international aid system – despite the fact that American humanitarian aid spending represents nearly 50% of the global total.

The EU must ensure its system remains closely connected to the UN's and that it continues to push for reform of the international humanitarian system. In Valerie Amos, the UK politician recently appointed as the UN's under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs, Georgieva will find an important potential ally not only in reforms, but also in efforts to draw in new donors, like India and Saudi Arabia.

Improving the EU's and the international community's delivery of humanitarian aid poses technical challenges, but European leaders must also recognise that 'emergency response' is rarely just a technical issue. Pakistan's floods are not only a human tragedy but also a political problem, opening up opportunities for the Taliban. Haiti's earthquake was a huge blow to UN-led efforts to build a functioning state there. The political neutrality of 'pure' humanitarian agencies, like the Red Cross, allows them to operate in places like Somalia, but aid delivery routinely involves military hardware: the EU naval force off Somalia's coast protects the UN's food shipments, and in Afghanistan NATO escorts the UN World Food Programme's aid convoys.

Handling complex emergencies therefore requires more than humanitarian aid. It demands military hardware. And it demands civilian state-builders, such as the policemen and advisers that the EU has sent to the Balkans and Afghanistan.

Such support requires decisions by politicians and political organisations. Unlike the Red Cross, the EU is a political organisation – and its capacity to deal with the complex political aspects of humanitarian crises suffers from deep flaws. Its civilian state-building missions, for example, are frequently 30% understaffed. The EU's goal of improving humanitarian aid is laudable, but it needs to focus on improving its political response as much as its ability to deliver aid.

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